

"To promote Christian ideals for agriculture and rural life; to interpret the spiritual and religious values which inhere in the processes of agriculture and the relationships of rural life; to magnify and dignify the rural church; to provide a means of fellowship and cooperation among rural agencies: *Toward a Christian Rural Civilization.*"

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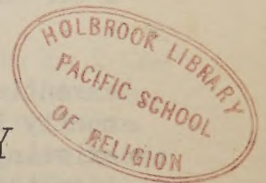
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## THE EXPRESSION OF CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY

By John A. Hostetler\*



What is community? The word means different things even to the same people. Religious people, storekeepers, salesmen, politicians, sociologists, city planners, engineers -- all use the word. What are they talking about? To some the term means:

1. A countryside decked with fat barns and busy people who make good money and mind their own business.
2. A church where members come together to sing, to hear the Gospel preached, and to find spiritual and social satisfaction.
3. Mennonites living in geographic proximity with no one else like them nearby,

### SOME ELEMENTS OF COMMUNITY

Community consists of three essentials without which there is no community: (1) persons, (2) material space, and (3) enduring common interests which satisfy the basic needs of the members.

Persons: Communities are made up of persons, not individuals. For clarity's sake I like to distinguish between the person and the individual. A person has the qualities of speech and language and of the skills which he learns from his associates and social environment. An individual is a piece of live protoplasm (with body and soul) capable of becoming a person, but he is not a person until he acquires the ways of mankind. Normally every individual who reaches the age of maturity is (more or less) a person, depending on the extent to which he has become a social creature. Some individuals develop into persons early in life, others late. It takes persons to make a community, not individuals.

Material Space: Communities are located on the surface of the earth. Probably none have ever existed in the air! There have been underground communi-

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ties, but on the whole the space they occupy is generally on the surface of the earth. Space is necessary for community.

Enduring Common Interests which Satisfy Basic Needs: If people in a certain area satisfy their basic needs by living and working together and if they think of themselves as a group apart from all other groups, they constitute a community. A group of persons may have common interests, but unless they are sufficiently permanent and persist through time, they do not constitute community. A group of spectators watching a kite have an interest in common and occupy a certain space, but they do not constitute a community.

What Is Christian Community? Christian community has all of the above essentials -- persons, space, and enduring common interests. The Christian community is built not by adding a fourth or more elements but by transforming the existing elements in community. It would regenerate the person, occupy and utilize the space as God's, and change the common interests by giving them new direction.

A Christian community cannot be built by transforming just one or two of the elements. A religion which preaches regeneration of the (1) person without recognizing (2) space matter and (3) the common interest of its members in its teaching is very unlikely to succeed in building a Christian community.

In the Christian community there is oneness. By simple arithmetic one plus one equals two. But in the Christian community there is a qualitative dimension not comprehended by addition. Adding soul to soul, mind to mind, always sums up to ONE. There is one mind, one memory, one Master, one race, one expectation, and one bond.

The Christian community is made up of Christian persons. To be Christian means to be in Christ. To become a Christian means to become a new creation. As the Apostle wrote, "Wherefore if any man is in Christ, he is a new creature: the old things are passed away; behold they are become new." For those who would dwell in this community this is the basic requirement or condition. Christ and his people together form one body. The body of Christ (the Christian community) is an organism which functions as a whole. No member suffers privately without the whole body also suffering. Christian community is communion or spiritual fellowship with Christ and with one another.

### EXPRESSIONS OF COMMUNITY

How Can the Christian Community Express Itself? This is the central problem we face. The Gospel changes person, family, community, and nation. No Christian can be a new creation without giving social expression. But how, when and where does this expression come about? The problem is a real one for the perplexing times in which we live. The line between Christian and non-Christian behavior is not very clear sometimes.

Christian communities in history have given social expression in different ways. The Book of Acts is full of brief accounts of social action, of outward behavior resulting from inner spiritual life. The number of Christian communities founded, as reported in that book, is inspiring and challenging.

Through the centuries different patterns of action have been taken by Christian communities on major social questions. John C. Bennett in his book, CHRISTIAN ETHICS AND SOCIAL POLICY, thinks there are at least four major Chris-



tian strategies: (1) Catholic strategy; (2) the strategy of withdrawal, which he thinks is best illustrated by the Mennonites; (3) the identification of Christianity with particular social programs; and (4) the double standard for personal and public life. Most of the major denominations today have designated special committees of "social action" to work on problems of Christian conduct affecting their social behavior.

Some ways in which Christian community finds social expression as applied to our own Christian group, I believe, are the following. Many others might be added.

1. Christian social action behaves as expressed by the Apostle in I Corinthians 13, "Love is patient and kind; love is not jealous or boastful; it is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrong but rejoices in the right. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things." This love can manifest itself only as Christians express it in social relationships. The contacts between members of the family, neighborhood, community, and larger community all are opportunities for this quality of contact.

2. The witness of the Christian community has in it a prophetic or mysterious quality, as reported in the Book of Acts. There is in it always the element of surprise or the unexpected. The persons who were converted under the preaching of Paul and Peter are examples. The unconverted were amazed at the conduct of these humble Christians. God works in mysterious ways his wonders to perform, and perhaps we have made his ways too familiar, too commonplace. The non-Christian world is no longer astounded by the conduct of Christians. They can predict too well what we are like. Our mission boards are set up to evangelize, and our mutual aid societies are set up to aid our people -- they know all this. They study our behavior, know it pretty well, can predict it, and therefore are not surprised when we act as we do.

If we need a thousand tongues to praise His name, as we sometimes sing, then we need ten times that many ways to express the love of God in social relationships. We must find ways to love sinners at their most unexpected moment, to surprise them with humble service with "no strings attached" and catch them in their most unexpected hour with the mutual aid of kindness. Returning good for evil is itself an act of surprise, but as soon as such acts become institutionalized, they tend to lose their impact and surprise element.

Institutional forms of expression are necessary. We need them as bulwarks to make impacts on a sinful society. They are needful for passing on ideals to the next generation. But should such institutional forms of behavior become fossilized or ingrown then they paralyze Christian community, stripping it of its witness vitality. God's love is mysterious, amazing, beyond comprehension. Let the Christian community express it so.

3. That which is expressed by the Christian community is the same regardless of geography or time. Whether human contacts are long and enduring or whether short and of brief duration, they are capable of



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conveying an element of love-astonishment. Love works in rural or urban places, in any weather, or under any conditions conceivable to the human mind. Contacts differ somewhat in kind, amount, and quality between city and country, but human nature and sin are essentially the same in both.

In the city, contacts  
between any two persons  
on the average are:

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1. Indirect and remote
  2. Few in number
  3. Patterned
  4. Communicated in few ways
  5. Not reciprocal
  6. Not sustained
  7. Meanings are segregated

In the country, contacts  
between any two persons  
on the average are:

- 
1. Direct
  2. Many in number
  3. Not patterned (diversified)
  4. Communicated in many ways
  5. Reciprocal
  6. Sustained
  7. Meanings are related to a whole

In a Christian community persons have a chance to know one another as whole persons, to know and be known by the same person in a variety of ways. There is community when persons have opportunity to know one another at a deeper level than that of words or intellectual matters.

4. The Christian community is capable of expressing its virtues among all men everywhere. We must become aware of the universality of our message. The unique combination of a biblical theology with appropriate social expression must be acclaimed and shared abroad. It is urgent. It is exciting. Young people are beginning to stake their lives in it. The war years have made us conscious of who we are. Our periodicals have voiced ideals and points of conscience. This has made us self-conscious. We have looked at our own photographs of barns, crops and kitchens. We must begin to look still more outward and out beyond ourselves. There are, I believe, hundreds and thousands of people who would like to believe and live as we say we believe. But we have not succeeded in surprising very many with the prophetic love of Christ.

5. In the ideal Christian community faith and practice are the same. One is indistinguishable from the other. What one does is the same as what one believes, and what one believes is the same as what one does. The great discrepancy between faith and practice among Christian people today is paralyzing the power of Christian testimony. In our own communities we need a sharper sense of conscience, not alone in business matters but in simplicity, in morality, in dress, in stewardship of soil and buildings, in the investment of time and talent. We need to learn again that neighbors are more important than farms.

6. The Christian community will affect the whole social order by breaking up and spreading into smaller communities, each of which becomes an ethical lighthouse witnessing to eternal values. The entire life, thought, and activity of these small communities should be guided by a Christ-centered point of view. The new smaller communities should be redemptive, motivated by love, and what sociologists call *Gemeinschaft* groupings. The schools, churches, business places, and governing body should all be centered on the doctrine of the redeeming love of Christ, expressed Godward and manward.

The life of a Christian community may be long or short. Christ did not ask his followers to build only those that would have the probability of lasting the longest. Their strength is not measured in the number of days they survived but by the intensity of their love for the few days allotted to them.